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*The Dead Beat: Lost Souls, Lucky Stiffs, and
the Perverse Pleasures of Obituaries*

HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Imagine activists around the world, wired to each other and to the world's information resources, each capable of measuring the impact of drought, or tracking the efficacy of a prenatal clinic. . .

Almost everything about the scene was old-fashioned, even ancient. The setting was Rome, which sits on ruins. The librarians at the heart of it shared traditional values; one had a background in medieval philosophy. The principles at work were thousands of years old, rooted in charity. In fact, in almost all ways but one, these librarians inhabited an older and timeless world. But their mission had a quintessentially modern twist. They were teaching the others in their community how to video chat; how to post photos to Flickr; how to use GIS, geographic information systems; how to zip around the Internet; how to bend their laptops to the cause of social justice around the world.

Ever since I'd heard Kathy Shaughnessy, the librarian from St. John's, speak at the American Library Association convention about her cyber-missionary work teaching computer skills to students from a wide variety of countries, I had been eager to see her and her team in action, in Rome, where St. John's had a campus.

Shaughnessy's mother was a high school librarian who was fascinated by computers and convinced they could be useful in libraries. Under her influence, Kathy, the youngest of seven, studied logic and programming, and turned into the sort of person who couldn't wait to test the new software. After completing coursework for a Ph.D. in medieval philosophy, she moved on to her mother's profession. A "cradle Catholic," she measured her work by standards of social justice. "I like to look at the world and see how it is, and how it can be-how it *could* be-a little bit better if it was better organized. And the ability to access information and the ability to use computers-I see *not* being able to do those things as an injustice."

Shaughnessy's computer skills and philosophical background made her a good fit on the St. John's library faculty. She worked closely with the vice provost for distance learning and director of the Division of Library and Information Science, a visionary who was building the infrastructure for a university without geographic limits. In the nine years Jeffery Olson had been working on distance learning for St. John's, students had gone from not being able to pay fees or register online to being able to get a degree while living in Rwanda or India. (The university had also, incidentally, been named

one of *PC Magazine's* top twenty wired campuses in 2006 ..) Olson's team was equipped to launch this program before it had even been conceived.

Now Olson, Shaughnessy, an assistant professor and instructional services librarian, and Kevin Rioux, an assistant professor in the library school, were about to dispense laptop computers and digital cameras to their third class of international students, some of whom had never touched a computer. The job of the St. John's library team was to teach the students what they needed to know technologically, create an activist community across language barriers and time zones, then send them home, where the students would complete their master's degrees online over the next two years, write their theses, and, oh yeah, save the world.

I had been to Rome before-a pagan Rome, littered with half-excavated archaeological sites and crisscrossed by sleek women in high heels on Vespas. The Rome I saw this time, following Shaughnessy, was a company town, Catholic to its core. To get ~here, you left the urban heart, its fountains and cafes, the pines and palms and the crumbling walls of the old city, even the ancient bejeweled churches, and took the good subway, the air-conditioned one that rumbled beneath the city and emerged over the Tiber River, the Vatican glinting just long enough for a wave goodbye before the metro chariot plunged back underground and sped you nearly to the end of the line. One steep escalator after another pulled you from the center of the earth into a city drained of charm and beauty, a big

traffic corridor, no shade, vendors selling cheap purses, batteries, baby clothes, and in the distance, a McDonald's, the landmark where you turned onto via Aurelia and headed west toward the Idente residence, a missionary training facility that served as home base for the St. John's master's students.

I walked for half an hour in the Mediterranean sun, past car dealers and gas stations and mysterious institutional buildings, the only pedestrian lurching along the commercial thoroughfare-whiz! honk! whonnnnk!-barely a word of Italian in my quiver, the least likely pilgrim on the planet. Shaughnessy, in a flowered skirt and radiant smile, welcomed my limp and bedraggled self into the placid interior of the building, where long pale-green vertical blinds kept the atmosphere cool and hushed. There were austere dorms upstairs, a cafeteria downstairs, classrooms and an open lounge with polished granite floors on the main level-and free wifi throughout. The students walked around shyly, nodding and smiling, the Indian women, the Caribbean men, most in their thirties and early forties. Many of them were already nuns and priests, missionaries and human rights workers; this program would wire them and give them a scholarly foundation. The newest class was immersing itself in information resources, economics, and theology classes, all of it in English, though most spoke multiple languages. The first class had reunited after two years of staying in touch by computer. They were now winding up their studies and preparing to graduate.

A vending machine dispensed perfectly fine cappuccino for half a euro, so I sat and sipped and watched the students swirl

past as Shaughnessy pointed out some of the members of the Social Justice team. Sister Margaret John Kelly, tall and austere, in plain white shirt and dark skirt, a cropped veil hiding her trim gray hair, turned the corner with Dr. Annalisa Sacca, who was petite and dramatically made-up. A contessil with jewels on almost every finger, Sacca wore heels and a swirly skirt, her hands and face in constant motion. Two styles of women, one goal.

As Sacca told me later, she and her dear old friend Dr. Riccardo Colasanti, the secretary general of the Catholic charity Caritas of Rome, were having dinner one evening in the city, and Colasanti was confiding his frustrations. Caritas was pouring tons of money into charity, but as far as he could tell, it wasn't making much of a difference.

"How? How?" Sacca demanded, painted eyes flashing and red nails fluttering. "How can we change the world? Really!"

"We must find a new way of educating people!" Colasanti declared. So the two created an initiative on the spot: a graduate program designed to give people around the world some useful tools for promoting social justice: a program that would enable students to remain in their communities while learning how to investigate, document, and fight injustice using the Internet. Imagine activists around the world, wired to each other and to the world's information resources, each capable of measuring the impact of drought, or tracking the efficacy of a prenatal clinic . . .

Colasanti would provide the financial backing through his charities, and Sacca would rope in St. John's, which had estab-

lished a presence in Rome. They chose "an empty box," an interdisciplinary master's program with flexible requirements—a master's in Liberal Arts with a Concentration in Global Development and Social Justice. Not "development" as in bringing McDonald's and Monsanto to your village; development in the sense of "realizing the fullness of human life." The key to implementing the program was the St. John's librarians and library school faculty, who would teach the students everything they needed to know to be long-distance students, keep them connected, and establish an online community for them. Sacca worked quickly ("She does everything quickly," Shaughnessy said) to win accreditation, and within a year and a half of her brainstorming dinner with Colasanti, the new master's program was recruiting students. Fifteen students', most from emerging countries, received full scholarships each year, including travel to and from Rome for their initial training, and again two years later, for their final presentations and graduation. Five students from the United States helped subsidize the program by paying full tuition and expenses, though one shouldered graduate assistant duties in exchange for reduced fees. The program would be technologically sophisticated, but Olson, a tall, smiling man with a gentle manner, stressed that the technological component was "not the end but an important means." The mission was the point; ThinkPads just happened to be efficient networking and delivery systems.

Every class I sat in on in Rome included a reference to Saint Vincent, the patron saint of the university and its affiliated priests and nuns. Vincent de Paul, a seventeenth-century

priest, was a fine model for activists today, so the students were told. He was an advocate for women, slaves, beggars—anyone who suffered discrimination. Vincent believed in free will, equality, and dignity; he was also, according to Sister Margaret John, an organizational genius, a man who could figure out how to get people to support each other in simple but meaningful ways, such as helping a sick family by assigning their neighbors different rights to bring food. "And that's what we need now," Sister Margaret John said. "People who are really good organizers."

It sounded like they were all back-to-basics Catholics with laptops, a humanist message, and a special appeal to women.

"I'm not Catholic," Olson pointed out. "I'm Mormon."

Whatever they were, everyone dropped his or her work at lunchtime and trooped to the cafeteria, though, as Shaughnessy said, "It's much better than a cafeteria. It's Italy!" No one skipped a chance to break bread together, to share prosciutto and pasta, wine and grapes, the ancient repast.

In a city of thieves—as the guidebooks always emphasized—we all left our laptops, purses, and backpacks on a table by the door, and didn't give them another thought. The relaxed attention that everyone brought to the conversation, as well as the delicious food, was in civilized contrast to the tourist bustle in Rome proper. I asked Olson at lunch where I could read a history of the program, but he said it hadn't been written. "It's a concern to this profession—some of us are so worried about what is getting lost in this era—and we need to

do more," he admitted. Just then a photographer arrived from New York to capture the first graduating class in Social Justice on film. At least there would be a photographic record.

That afternoon, the graduates posed for their portraits in the open lounge. The students slipped up to the dormitory rooms to swap their T-shirts and jeans and sandals for dress clothes. The Filipino and Indonesian men wore the traditional shirts made of pineapple fronds, called barongs. Four young women in vividly colored saris turned a little shy as onlookers exclaimed over their beauty. An African student was resplendent in her bright-red American-style suit. No one passing by failed to stop and compliment them, or offer hugs, or ask if any of their relatives had been able to come for the occasion. One young man's huge Italian-American family from Brooklyn would make up for those students with no one. A St. John's faculty adviser came from the U.S., though he had no classes to teach in Rome. He had mentored two of the students and simply wanted to see them graduate.

Not everyone who started the program had made it. But Eugenie Murekatete, who lost her husband in the fighting in Rwanda and was now working at the UN, was graduating; Parnel Saint-Hilaire from Haiti, who had just become a father, and whose baby cooed through more than one presentation that week, was graduating; the Vincentian activist from Indonesia who had kept them all posted during protests, the two men who had disappeared from the online community for weeks after a typhoon in the Philippines—they were graduating, and others, too, a dozen in all.

The first two classes had had audiences with Pope Benedict XVI while they were undergoing their initiation in Rome, further evidence of the religious pull of the program's founders, Sacca and Colasanti, but he was out of town this year, so the newest class of students missed out. They did get to attend a UN conference, sponsored by FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization. There they saw a parade of international policy makers and critics who put the students' mission in a secular context, including Vandana Shiva, the Indian physicist and activist, who gave them a short, scorching lesson in the idiocies of global trade policies and preventable starvation. In turn, two of the graduating students got to stand up and address the internationally known speakers. Sacca managed the conference, shuffling name cards at the big table onstage in the UN building near the Hippodrome, as the world activists, Harvard professors, journalists, and policy experts came and went through the day.

During the lectures, I sat next to the anthropology professor who trains the students in the uses of geographic information systems. "It's the ultimate interdisciplinary tool," Barrett Brenton enthused, and the parade of speakers with their charts and maps illustrating the feminization of poverty and the proliferation of AIDS orphans was punctuated by Brenton leaning over to whisper, "GIS-see that chart? GIS made that possible."

The new St. John's group benefited by being the third class to run the technological gauntlet with the librarians. Shaughnessy

and Rioux had spent a week with the first class and two weeks with the next, and keeping them all online and wired through the year had been exhausting. Even two weeks, the librarians learned, was not quite long enough to overcome the students' cultural shyness, second-language issues, and technostress, and when they left for home, Shaughnessy said, "I felt like I was abandoning them." A few of the far-flung students never really got the hang of Refworks, the program that allowed them to save and organize all their online sources, turning their desire to fight hunger, disease, and discrimination into scholarly papers; instead they laboriously typed up footnotes and citations, an old-fashioned waste of time. That, Shaughnessy felt, constituted a failure on her part, and "in a few cases, you didn't know whether they just couldn't use Refworks or they didn't have connectivity." So she and Rioux were staying in Rome with this latest class for the entire month of their initiation. There were opportunities for one-on-one sessions, and classes like this, a whole session devoted to this bibliographic organizing tool.

I sat between two young students, one from Kenya and one from Nigeria. Cara from San Diego and Jean from New Jersey mingled with priests from India and Ghana, four students from the Philippines, and a Cambodian. The Nigerian, Sister Bibiana, wore a simple cropped veil. "Now we're going to open an Internet window," Shaughnessy said, and her Think-Pad screen projected that page to the whole class. "When we opened our accounts last time, we got an error, remember?" Rioux jumped in, cheerleading: "And who's afraid? No one of

us!" Shaughnessy entered the password, and an error message came up. "Remember I mentioned Saint Jerome, the patron saint of libraries? Add Jerome as a 'trusted site' during login, then you're okay to enter."

It took twenty minutes to get everyone through the password and into the Refworks database. While Rioux worked on someone's stubborn laptop, Shaughnessy guided the class through a search for information about rehabilitation in prison populations, Sister Bibiana's special interest. Her search called up 7,699 resources. "I think you got some information here, Sister." Shaughnessy showed the class how to refine and narrow the search by subject; then she whittled it down to just scholarly journals—and thousands of articles turned into seventeen.

What seemed like a miracle from a distance was simply the librarian showing them how to find and save important information and organize it in a useful way. But nothing looked so magical as when she clicked to show all those sources lined up like rows of wheat or beans, in perfect Modern Language Association style: author's name, then title, then publication, then all the other details; and then she clicked again, and instantly the format changed. Now the same sources appeared in American Psychological Association style, with the author's name, then the date. The class gasped. Rioux told them: "This is the style you'll use if you're doing a scientific paper, because the date appears right after the author's name. The date matters more to Scientists."

There was joy in the missionaries' classroom. "Wow, wow!" the students said, sending their folders full of the heartaches and

miseries of the world zipping through cyberspace. Shaughnessy grinned at me. "Isn't it great when people get as excited as we do about information resources?"

"You all will use and reuse the UN Declaration of Human Rights, so put that in your folder now," Rioux counseled them, "And look, if you lose something, it wouldn't be tragic, because you can always generate it again."

"Hopefully, this makes you a little less anxious," Shaughnessy said, and obviously it had; the students who streamed out of the classroom looked like the wrinkles had been ironed out of their foreheads, and Sister Bibiana was beaming. Afterward, Shaughnessy commiserated over their challenges: "I cannot even imagine how hard it is for them." Rioux called out after the students, "I sent you all a *BusintssWeek* article about information services and restrictions on cybercafes in India. Read if you want, and we'll chat at dinner."

The librarians' organizing for the greater good had already had an impact. After class, Shaughnessy made me a copy of a homemade facebook one of the new American students had compiled on his own initiative. In addition to photos of each new student and each administrator, with addresses, e-mails, and birthdays, he had drawn up a list broken down by time zones. When it was noon in the Philippines and seven a.m. in Kenya, it was nine p.m. in San Diego and midnight at St. John's in Queens.

Another of Shaughnessy and Rioux's students, a former detective from Brooklyn, has already announced what she wants to do when she finishes this program and her thesis on

the use of information systems in the Congo. She will soon begin studies for a St. John's master's in Library and Information Science, and follow in Shaughnessy and Rioux's footsteps. "Being a researcher is no different than being a detective," Evelyn Cruz told me.

A friendly, burly man in shorts and sneakers, Kevin Rioux wrote his master's thesis on inhalant abuse on the Mexican border; he managed to discuss the horrors of the world without delusion while maintaining a cheerful, upbeat face. "I grew up in New Orleans, but I was born in Maine. I'm French-Canadian, not Cajun." His mother was on the last plane out of New Orleans before Katrina hit, and found herself in Houston, among people who had no sympathy for those who didn't evacuate. "Some people have no idea what it's like to live without a credit card," Rioux said, shaking his head. He was passionate about social justice, and had written a number of scholarly papers that link everyday library and information practice with human rights goals. He mentioned Shaughnessy's education in philosophy, and said, "We're trying to find a philosophical framework for this work. The Vincentians are conservative, but they're humane, and that's important to us; and we have our intellectual freedom." The *we* is personal: Kathy Shaughnessy and Kevin Rioux planned to marry between the time the first class graduated in late July and the beginning of the first semester in late August—not in Rome, which would have been lovely, but in Shaughnessy's hometown, Baltimore; her family is too large to travel, and marrying without their presence was unthinkable. "I know, Baltimore in August,"

Shaughnessy said with a laugh. Her mother suggested several alternative dates, but, "No, it pretty much has to be the sixteenth," she told her.

So, between the impending graduation and the marriage of the professors their students called "the special K's," jubilation was what I expected to find the next day. Instead I discovered Shaughnessy sitting at a table in the open lounge, stricken. While the librarians and other faculty members had been toiling in Rome, arid university administrators were on their way to Italy to celebrate the first graduating class in this program, the library on the St. John's home campus in Queens was losing some of its space. Now workmen on the upper floors had damaged pipes, flooding the librarians' offices and soaking some of the stacks and the computer lab and archives downstairs. While she'd been teaching students how to stay wired and connected in a disaster-fraught world, an apparently preventable disaster had devastated the library back home.

, "it will take us years to recover," Rioux said later, with typical pragmatic directness. "We've been told we'll have to work from home next semester. You can't have a university of fifteen thousand students without a library. If we didn't have our online resources, we'd have to shut the university." The anthropology professor was keeping them posted; his wife, the university's archivist, was picking through the damaged collections and e-mailing details of the bad news.

The faculty members worked hard to master their emotions in front of the students. They refused to let the wreckage of

their stateside library dim the celebration. The carafe of red wine on the dining table usually sat untouched, but on the last day of classes, wine found its way into the students' glasses, as a feeling of giddiness began to filter into the halls.

There were so many priests at the altar of St. Peter's Pontifical Oratorio Chapel, I felt like I was in a seminary. Everyone wanted to take part in this graduation. In the airy, modern chapel tucked in a fragrant hillside a few miles from the Idente residence; an impressive procession of priests, Monsignors, and even a cardinal coming down the aisle opened the ceremonies. They would celebrate Mass, and then we'd all move to the plush auditorium for the graduation ceremony, first in English, then Italian. The only priest I recognized was Father John-Pierre Ruiz, the director of the Social Justice program; during lunch he had kindly and articulately explained some of the Church's policies to me.

Unlike the splendid baroque churches I had visited in Rome, this one was modern polished brick, with a stark crucifix on the altar and a modern metal sculpture running along the walls to indicate the Stations of the Cross—it looked like barbed wire. The interior was no competition for the glory of the suits and saris and academic robes of the graduates and their people. Here they were, *in Rome*, in a place and time they had struggled to get to, and they were beaming. Parnel's baby, fussing, was gathered up by one of the new students, who took him to the vestibule and rocked him. In an alcove near the

altar, a group from the Philippines sang the AU~luia joyously and energetically. They ended with multiple harmonies that echoed through the chapel.

I had sat through a long childhood of Masses, and long ago swore I'd never sit through another, but there I was, believing, if not in the risen Savior, then *something*. I murmured bits of the old familiar prayers. Jeff Olson sat respectfully, head bowed, while the others knelt or walked up to take Communion; but when one of the priests announced it was time to wish each other peace, I grasped Olson's hand, and Shaughnessy's, and Rioux's, and sought out Sacca's and the woman who was responsible for the program's summer home in the 14th residence. "Peace, sister; peace, brother." I waved to the students across the aisle and they waved back. It was impossible for me not to feel an emotional stake in their struggles and their future peace.

The frocked men in the front of the chapel had decided beforehand who would give the benediction, who would pass out Communion, and who would deliver the sermon; they had split up the duties, so all could participate. The sermon was assigned to a priest who wasn't part of the Social Justice group and perhaps didn't quite understand how it worked. "Our obsession with and dependence on technology is frightening," he intoned. "BlackBerries, cell phones, the Internet, navigation systems, and remote controls—we are addicted to them. How many hours slip by? Do they make our lives easier? Simpler? Have they freed us for more quality moments, or simply made us busier?" I looked sideways as Shaughnessy

sighed beside me. The students listened with deference. Olson's face betrayed nothing. The librarians had constructed a cyber-network full of those very things that missionaries and human rights workers were using to further their work. Against all odds, and in spite of typhoons, figurative and real, they would stop long enough to celebrate a graduation and a marriage. But they had some work to do with their own people. They had to explain to at least one old-fashioned priest that it was all that technology that made this particular mission possible.